

TRANSPORTATION IN NORTH COUNTY

Dead Ends and Lack of Foresight

SYNOPSIS

North San Diego County contains 26% of the County's current population and, as an area, has one of the highest present and projected growth rates in the County. Its major highways (I-5, I-15 and SR78) are gridlocked. Its arterial street system is full of gaps. Plans for new major roads have been abandoned due to environmental constraints and local jurisdiction opposition.

Based upon numerous complaints by citizens that transportation congestion in North County is reaching intolerable levels, the Grand Jury decided to investigate the efforts that are being made by local government to improve transportation.

The Grand Jury investigated a number of proposed solutions to some of these problems, one of which was the North County Parkways Plan. Another one was the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project parallel to SR78, which is about to start construction. The Grand Jury recommends that the cities of Vista, San Marcos and Escondido, as well as the County, study increasing high-density development along the route of this line. The Grand Jury also recommends that the North County Transit District (NCTD) review and expand current plans for bus service to the planned transit stations to strengthen potential ridership for this \$350 million investment.

The Grand Jury recommends that San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) work to design and speedily implement a plan to complete and maximize the carrying capacity of the arterial street network and upgrade highway interchanges in North San Diego County. The Grand Jury also recommends the creation of a revolving loan fund to enable key roads to be completed in advance of private development.

Another recommendation the Grand Jury makes is that SANDAG adjust the distribution of funding between transportation modes (transit, highway, arterials, etc.) to reflect more closely a project's ability to reduce congestion. It was noted that the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project is funded, yet the North County Parkways Plan (which would reduce congestion 5 times more than the light rail for approximately the same public dollars) is not funded.

ISSUES

1. What is the present state of transportation in North San Diego County?
2. What are the proposed transportation improvements planned for North San Diego County?
3. Will the proposed Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project meet its ridership expectations?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

North San Diego County is defined by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) as the combination of two of the County's seven Major Statistical Areas: North County West and North County East. Appendix A shows that North County includes the cities of Solana Beach, Encinitas, Carlsbad, Oceanside, Vista, San Marcos, and Escondido. North County also includes the unincorporated areas of Rancho Santa Fe, Bonsall, Camp Pendleton, Fallbrook, Pala, and Valley Center. North San Diego County is home to a population of approximately 750,000, which is 26% of San Diego County's current population. Population growth in the North County is higher than the County's growth as a whole.

The region has two major north-south freeways (I-5 and I-15), both severely congested during peak hours. I-15 is being severely impacted by growth, not only in San Diego County, but also in Riverside County, where many San Diego workers live because of lower housing costs. Major freeway expansion programs are underway on both north-south freeway routes. The region has only one east-west freeway, SR78, and one east-west highway, SR76, both of which are also congested. Plans to widen SR76 are years away from funding. The only east-west freeway, SR78, is not capable of being economically expanded due to extensive industrialization, commercialization, and housing along the freeway. A second east-west freeway was planned between SR56 and SR78; however, it was dropped due to community opposition from Encinitas and Rancho Santa Fe.

Transit in North County is primarily a bus system with 35 fixed-route and some special-use buses. There is also a commuter rail connection, *The Coaster*, to downtown San Diego. Road congestion is severe throughout the region, not only due to a lack of freeways and highways, but also a lack of interconnected arterials. Each of the area's cities is primarily interested in addressing its own citizens' concerns with respect to traffic, not regional solutions. As a result, the few freeways/highways and existing arterial street connections carry a heavy

load, because many of the arterial roads are not throughways, as local jurisdictions have blocked construction at their boundaries.

Current Plans and Proposals

There are three plans/proposals of interest in relieving the traffic congestion in North County. First is a planned east-west light rail system, which is expected to start construction within the next two years, linking Oceanside and Escondido (see Appendix B). This line will follow the route of an existing freight rail line through areas having very low population density. As presently planned, this proposed light rail line may not provide any significant relief to traffic congestion in the area. To maximize ridership, there must be concentrations of residential, commercial and industrial development along the line, especially near each of the fifteen planned stations. In particular, this development must meet the needs of likely transit riders--students, seniors, the disabled, and those with low income.

All planned transit stations along the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project are undeveloped or relatively undeveloped for rail at this time. Though a bus transit center exists at the east and west terminals (Oceanside Transit Center and the Escondido Transit Center) and a small one at Vista Transit Center, only Oceanside has a rail station set up. The governmental agencies that control land use around these stations, with the exception of Oceanside, have no plans to study increasing densities around these stations. Oceanside will initiate a study of land planning for a quarter mile area surrounding each of its seven transit stations in the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project.

While SANDAG and the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) are concentrating on widening I-5 and I-15 through North County, a second and third plan have been proposed by County Supervisors who represent the North County area.

Supervisor Horn has proposed a new north-south freeway and light rail system east of Escondido (see Appendix C). The freeway would originate on I-15 north of Escondido, connect with SR78, then SR67 and merge with SR52 near Santo Rd. The light rail would originate at the eastern terminal of the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project, then parallel the new north-south highway, continue along SR52 to south I-15, ending at the San Diego Trolley Stadium station. This plan would allow a circle of rail transit throughout the County. It is expected that this freeway would divert traffic from I-15 to and from Riverside County, through North County to the employment centers of San Diego. This plan is in its nascent stage and has yet to be evaluated by CalTrans.

Supervisor Slater has proposed a series of arterial road improvements as a way of reducing freeway congestion. This plan, entitled the North County Parkways Plan (see Appendix D), would increase the carrying capacity of existing arterials in Carlsbad, Encinitas, Vista and San Marcos, rather than requiring the construction of new freeways. Even though some critics say the Parkways Plan would cover only a small portion of North County, it would relieve traffic in the most populated areas of North County.

The San Diego County *2020 Regional Transportation Plan* identifies the following techniques for increasing the carrying capacity of arterial streets:

- Preferential signal treatment,
- Medians,
- Limitation and separation of left-turn movements,
- Limited driveway and other access controls,
- Grade separations or interchanges at critical locations, and
- High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes for ridesharing and transit.

These are the same techniques that are proposed for the Parkways Plan.

CalTrans has evaluated the Parkways Plan and has found that improving the existing arterial roadway plan in North San Diego County, as proposed by the Parkways Plan, would reduce travel time for North County drivers by over 5.7 million hours a year.

PROCEDURES EMPLOYED

The Grand Jury investigation consisted of a review of transportation planning documents submitted by SANDAG, the North County Transit District, and the City of Encinitas. The City of Oceanside provided information on their planned Transit Corridor Study. The Jury also reviewed written inputs received from Vista, San Marcos and Escondido showing that they have no plans to study land use around the planned transit stations in their respective jurisdictions; though requested, no written input was received from the County.

In addition to published materials, personal interviews were held with Supervisors Slater and Horn, NCTD personnel in charge of planning the Oceanside-to-Escondido rail line, and the Director of Transportation Planning for SANDAG.

FACTS

- A. North San Diego County is defined by SANDAG as the area including the cities of Solana Beach, Encinitas, Carlsbad, Oceanside, Vista, San Marcos, and Escondido. North County also includes the unincorporated

areas of Rancho Santa Fe, Fallbrook, Bonsall, and Valley Center, among others.¹

- B. The Census 2000 population for North County was approximately 750,000, or 26% of the total population of San Diego County. North County had an annual growth rate for the period between 1990 and 2000 of approximately 2%. Growth for the County as a whole during this same period was approximately 1.3%.²
- C. Population projections estimate an additional 135,000 people will be added to the population of North San Diego County during the 2000-2010 period, for an annual estimated growth rate of approximately 1.8%. The estimated annual growth rate for the County as a whole during this same period is projected to be approximately 1.7%.³
- D. More than half North County's daily auto travel is on highways I-5, I-15, SR76, and SR78. In addition, residents of Riverside County, primarily from the areas of Temecula and Murietta, also use North County roads to access the coastline and employment centers of San Diego County.⁴
- E. Present commute delays on I-15 range from 30-45 minutes. Traffic projections for I-5 show significant increases in traffic by 2020.⁵
- F. CalTrans has expansion projects to increase the capacity of I-5 and I-15 by about 30% over the next 10 years. SR78 cannot be economically widened. Funding for the completion of SR76 from Melrose Blvd. to the I-15 is not expected during the next decade, given present funding sources and priorities.⁶
- G. Improvement of the I-5 / SR78 interchange has been identified as a high priority project for inclusion in upcoming revisions of the *2020 Regional Transportation Plan* by SANDAG and CalTrans.⁷
- H. Major arterial streets that remain uncompleted in North San Diego County include Melrose Blvd., College Blvd., Cannon Road, Citracado Pkwy. and Questhaven Road. In addition, there are major streets proposed as

¹ "Major Statistical Areas", SANDAG, April 1993.

² "Data Warehouse", SANDAG, 2001.

³ "Data Warehouse", SANDAG, March 2002.

⁴ *2020 Regional Transportation Plan*, SANDAG, April 2000.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ "Update of Missing Connections Study", SANDAG, January 2002.

regional arterials—such as Poinsettia Lane, Faraday Ave., Rancho Del Oro Road and El Fuerto St.—that also remain uncompleted.⁸

- I. Supervisor Slater has proposed the Parkways Plan to accelerate completion and enhancement of some arterial roads in North San Diego County. CalTrans has estimated that this Parkways Plan has the potential to provide annual travel time savings of 5.7 million hours.⁹
- J. Supervisor Horn has proposed a new north-south freeway, which would parallel I-15 for approximately 28 miles, located east of Escondido. SANDAG has estimated that any new freeway would have a cost in the range of \$75-100 million per mile.¹⁰
- K. North County Transit District's (NCTD) fixed route busses (35 routes) service an area of more than 1,000 square miles. NCTD is also responsible for *The Coaster* commuter rail service that operates 22 trips daily between Oceanside and downtown San Diego. Additionally, NCTD manages demand-responsive bus services and paratransit services in areas not served by the fixed route system.¹¹
- L. NCTD's fixed bus routes service over 11 million riders annually and recovers 30% of its operating costs from fares. The Coaster's ridership is 1.3 million riders annually, recovering about 35% of its operating expenses from fares.¹²
- M. In 2003, NCTD is planning to start construction of a light rail system from Oceanside to Escondido on an existing 22 mile freight right-of-way. This \$350 million project parallels the congested SR78 for a significant portion of its route. It will replace a fixed bus route along SR78, which is the route with the highest ridership in NCTD. This Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project is expected to carry 4,000,000 riders annually starting in 2005; with an annual travel time savings of over 1 million hours. Fares are projected to be 42% of operating costs.¹³
- N. The City of Oceanside has initiated a study of land usage surrounding its seven transit stations planned for the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project. The cities of Vista, San Marcos, and Escondido, as well as the County of San Diego, have no current plans to study land uses around the

⁸ 2020 *Regional*, *op. cit.*

⁹ 2020 *Traffic Projections-Parkways Project*, CALTRANS, February 2002.

¹⁰ 2020 *Regional*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Fast Forward: Strategic Business Plan*, NCTD, November 1999.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *New Start Criteria for the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project*, NCTD, November 1998.

remaining eight rail transit stations in their respective jurisdictions along the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project.¹⁴

- O. NCTD, to increase future ridership on the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project, is planning on implementing a series of shuttle buses and fixed bus route modifications between the transit stations and surrounding developments.¹⁵

FINDINGS

- I. Based upon population numbers, North County needs a greater level of highway infrastructure. This is due, in a large part, to the defeat of future east-west highway plans by the County and the City of Encinitas. The expansion of I-5 and I-15 and the improvement of interchanges with SR78 are essential to correcting this imbalance.¹⁶
- II. Because of environmental and political constraints, no new major north-south highways will be built in North County between I-5 and I-15, even though the population of North County is expected to grow 25% by 2015.¹⁷
- III. The proposed North County Parkways Plan has the potential to reduce traffic congestion significantly in the near term at a reasonable cost. The Parkways Plan will reduce congestion 5 times more than the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project for approximately the same amount of public funds.¹⁸
- IV. Ridership potential for the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project is hampered by the lack of “smart growth” planning by the cities and the County around most of the transit stations.¹⁹
- V. A number of the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project transit stations have only limited shuttle bus or fixed route bus connections to the surrounding communities, especially the industrial areas of Oceanside and South Vista, which further hampers ridership potential.²⁰

¹⁴ Cities of Vista, San Marcos, Oceanside, Escondido, and County of San Diego.

¹⁵ *Fast Forward, op. cit.*

¹⁶ Facts A, B, C, D & E

¹⁷ Facts F, G, H

¹⁸ Fact I

¹⁹ Facts M, N

²⁰ Fact O

RECOMMENDATIONS

That San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG):

- 02-53:** Study the need to upgrade the connecting ramps of SR78/I-5 and SR78/, I-15 and the corresponding need to complete such up grades no later than the corresponding widening of the I-5 and I-15 in these areas.²¹
- 02-54:** Study the need for North San Diego County arterial streets to be completed and improved on an expedited schedule.
- 02-55:** Create a revolving loan fund to enable key roads to be completed in advance of private development.²²
- 02-56:** Modify the distribution of transportation funding among modes (e.g., transit, highways, arterials) to reflect more closely a project's ability to reduce congestion.

That the County of San Diego and the cities of Vista, San Marcos, and Escondido:

- 02-57:** Initiate transit corridor planning program studies of the need for a "smart growth" general plan and corresponding zoning changes in the areas surrounding the transit stations of the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project.²³

That the North County Transit District:

- 02-58:** Review its planning for shuttle bus and fixed-route connections to the transit stations of the Oceanside-Escondido Rail Project to ensure that the connections maximize ridership potential along the transit line.²⁴

²¹ Finding I

²² Finding III

²³ Finding IV

²⁴ Finding V

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
 - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
 - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
 - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.
- (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head

and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required by the date indicated:

RESPONDING AGENCY	RECOMMENDATIONS	DATE
San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)	02-53 through 02-56	09/09/02
San Diego County Board of Supervisors	02-57	09/09/02
City of Escondido	02-57	09/09/02
City of San Marcos	02-57	09/09/02
City of Vista	02-57	09/09/02
North County Transit District (NCTD)	02-58	09/09/02